

# लपतौलिंग्वा MANCHESTER

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# **Applying social networks to attitude studies: The case of Urdu in the Longsight community**

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## **1. Introduction**

The scientific study of attitude, especially language attitude, is a relatively new field dating back mainly to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The subject was previously considered either unimportant or too vague and indistinct to be investigated (Agheyisi & Fishman 1970). While the importance of language attitude studies is fairly established nowadays, the concept itself still remains indistinct and its definition a matter of debate. It is widely understood that we can achieve a satisfactory definition of attitude if we get a better understanding of its nature and the factors which control it (Garrett 2010).

However, understanding the nature of attitude is not an easy task for it is not an external and observable phenomenon (Baker 1992). Much in the same way we are unable to observe thoughts and feelings, we do not have access to attitudes and thus are unable to study them directly. Although behaviour is observable and can be closely connected to attitudes, an observed behaviour might have different interpretations depending on the observer and there is no guarantee that an observer's interpretation matches the reality of the intention and the underlying attitude. Such a mental state like an attitude can only be reported by the people themselves through introspection. Therefore, interviews, questionnaires and tests of different kinds in which participants themselves inform the researcher of their attitudes seem to be the best solution available (Roger & Fasold 1973).

As explained earlier, in order to get a better understanding of language attitude we need to determine the influential factors. There is no comprehensive list but different studies have attempted to isolate such factors as like age, gender, education, ability, language and cultural background in order to see their effects on people's language attitudes. It should be

noted that while certain factors may determine the attitude towards a particular language, some may not play any significant role at all. Therefore these factors vary from culture to culture and language to language. In fact oftentimes they are not always even present (Baker 1992).

This study intends to investigate another possible determining factor of language attitude, namely social networks. The idea of social networks has existed for at least a century but their systematic study and application is a recent phenomenon. James and Lesley Milroy first introduced the study of social networks to the field of sociolinguistics in 1975. Their study focused on the relation between network ties and vernacular variants in Belfast (Schiffman 1997). Since then, numerous studies have investigated the influence of network ties on language variation and change (Meyerhoff 2006). However, social networks have been rarely used in language attitude studies.

We propose that there is a relationship between peoples' attitudes towards a specific language and their social network structure. The hypothesis for this paper has a weak and a strong version:

- Weak: Individuals with more ties to speakers of the target language have a more positive attitude towards the language.
- Strong: Individuals with more ties to multilingual speakers have a more positive attitude towards the target language.

This study examines the validity of the strong and weak versions of the hypothesis.

## **2. Language and Area of Study**

We decided to focus our research on Urdu because we believed that having such a target language would provide us ample opportunity to investigate British attitudes towards certain languages that are oftentimes associated with negative perceptions. Although no official reporting from the British Social Attitudes Survey corroborates that communities at large maintain negative attitudes towards such languages as Urdu, studying the language and perhaps discovering findings that will suggest otherwise and even support these unspoken attitudes of negativity may prove to be interesting.

We also based our decision to study Urdu because of any negative implications that have come about as a result of the events of 9/11 and 7/7—we considered the possibility that such events may have influenced the public's perception of the language and thus affecting

social attitudes that may be associated with Urdu. Media coverage of Pakistan and Pakistani communities (especially after the floods) also seems to suggest that rising political tensions and general unease may also be further contributing to the already present negative attitudes, however internal they may be. BBC quoted British resident Raja Mohammed saying, "After 9/11 there has been significant tension and unease between the Pakistan-based communities and the host countries, due to the perceived 'home-grown' terror threat" (Sheerin 2010).

We also found that Urdu held a strong presence within Manchester given that Pakistanis are the largest minority group found in Manchester (at 3.8% of the whole population in 2001). Furthermore, Urdu also maintains a strong following with 400,000 British Pakistanis who use the language on an everyday basis. A report released by Manchester City Council showing that one of the largest Pakistani communities within Manchester resides in Longsight (with 24.63% of residents of Pakistani background) validates our decision to focus the area of our research in the neighborhood of Longsight. Therefore, Longsight would give us a predominantly Pakistani community in which the language of Urdu plays a central role in communication.

### **3. Methodology**

Initially we had planned to correspond with our informants via email. Our informants had to be speakers of Urdu and residents of Longsight. We were hoping informants to provide email addresses to which we were planning on sending our original questionnaire. Then the informants would in turn forward the questionnaire to family members and friends. All the completed forms would be returned to the study email address provided for analysis. From this our goal was to determine whether our informants' social network ties to multilingual and monolingual speakers, specifically Urdu speakers, affected their attitudes towards multilingualism and the language of Urdu.

During a preliminary trip to Longsight, we realised that although many were willing to answer a few questions, none of them were willing to provide us with their email addresses, as they felt it was too personal. With nobody willing to provide personal information, we understood that our chances of finding results via email were very poor. We then responded accordingly and changed our method of data collection from email to hard-copy questionnaires. This enhanced the qualitative aspect of our study as direct contact meant informants could expand on their responses. The questionnaire consisted primarily of closed questions in order for us to compare numerical results. We included one open-ended question to give

informants an opportunity to share their general opinions of Urdu. Those findings provided our qualitative data

Due to the aforementioned changes in methodology, our research no longer focused on social networks but instead focuses on attitudes towards Urdu and whether friendship ties could be used to explain these attitudes. We edited our original questionnaire such that the questions would provide more relevant results, such as languages used with their friends and their attitudes towards certain languages.

Due to the more informal nature, our new approach to the study yielded more positive responses from informants. On our second trip to Longsight, we were able to acquire 16 completed questionnaires. Informants were given the option of completing the questionnaires themselves or having their responses documented by one of the group members. All participants also completed a consent form.

### 3.1 Questionnaire

A questionnaire was devised into three main parts. (Appendix 1) Part 1 asked informants to provide the number of Urdu-speaking, multilingual and English-monolingual friends they had. These numbers were compared with the Part II Attitude Score (AS) in our quantitative analysis. Part II contained 10 Likert-scale statements with a general introductory question stating: "To what extent do you agree with the following?" and participants could choose from 1 (meaning strongly disagree) to 7 (meaning strongly agree) with 4 indicating no preference.

In order to calculate the AS for each participant, we matched the scale number for each statement with the following values:

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Value	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

Each participant's AS comprised of the sun of these values for each statement. We also encountered a few anomalies. First, the values corresponding to questions 2 and 8 had to be reversed because the nature of the question. Second, the value of statement 10 had to be considered 0 for all participants since the question did not reflect the participants' attitudes, rather was devised to let participants comment on English people's attitudes towards Urdu.

### 3.2 Ethics

As with any piece of research, we took precautions to ensure that our study did not cause any ethical issues. The consent form gave the participant the right to withdraw at any time without reason. We ensured anonymous involvement. When approaching potential participants we created a welcoming environment in which we explained our research.

However, as we were all present whilst the participants completed their questionnaire we realise observer's paradox may have been an issue and took careful consideration when evaluating our findings. Our presence as researchers may have affected the results. According to Li Wei (1994), this issue is particularly relevant to our field of research as this paradox afflicts investigations of bilingual communities in particularly acute form where the sense of ethnicity is strong and the investigator is not an 'insider'. Consequently, our results may need further study, as participants may have been unable to respond in a completely truthful way to someone outside of their community. Our informants may have been concerned about offending our group members or with their possible inability to provide results they may have thought we wanted.

This is known as The Hawthorne Effect and is defined by Carlopio (1982) as the "awareness of experimental participation or experimental demands." Our initial plan of conducting the questionnaires via email was intended to avoid the repercussions of the Hawthorne Effect. However, as we soon realised, people were uncomfortable with giving personal email addresses, and so completing the questionnaires in person became our only option, despite resulting ethical issues. This method of completing the questionnaire informally and 'on the spot' also resulted in occasional difficulties in communication between the participant and the researcher. The open-ended question asking informants to describe their opinions of Urdu often required additional prompting because informants were usually unsure what to say. We would ask 'Do you like the language/do you dislike it?' without intending to elicit responses affected by the wording of our prompts, however it is inevitable this would be the case which consequently will have had some effect on our results.

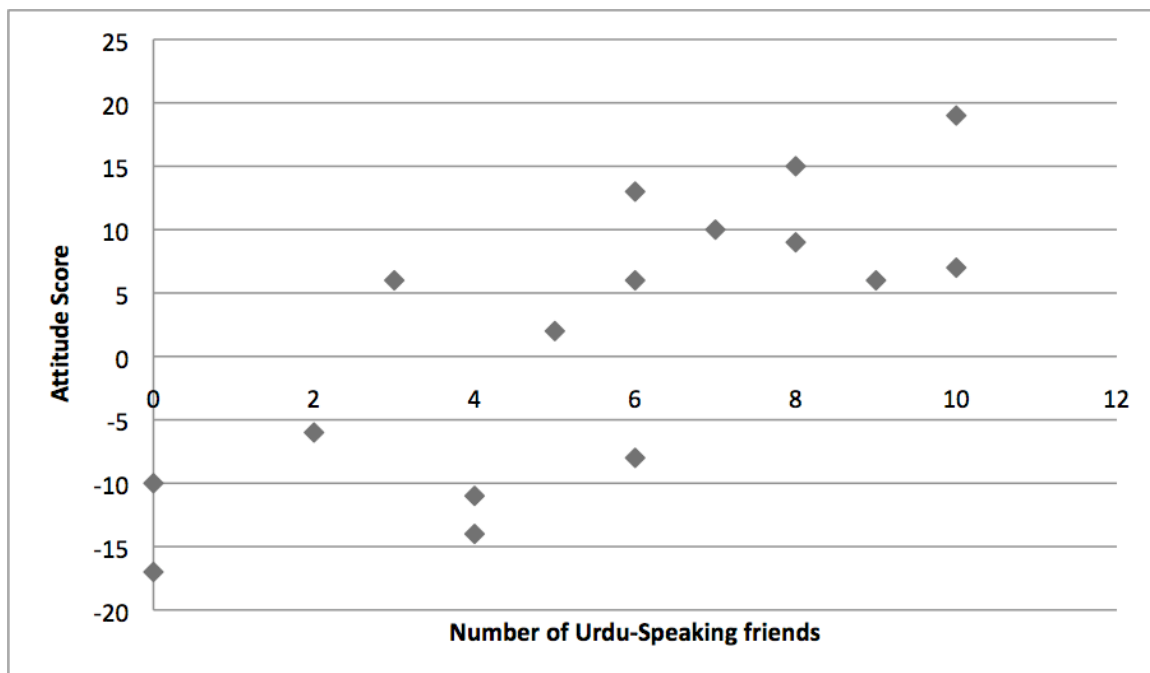
We also considered that some participants would not be comfortable with completing the forms themselves, for example, due to illiteracy. We avoided this issue by offering to write their responses for them.

In hindsight, the questionnaire itself could have been improved as asking a person's age could be regarded as too personal and should have been replaced with 'Date of Birth' as this appears less intrusive and still acquires the same information.

## 4. Quantitative Data Analysis

### 4.1 Individual Analysis

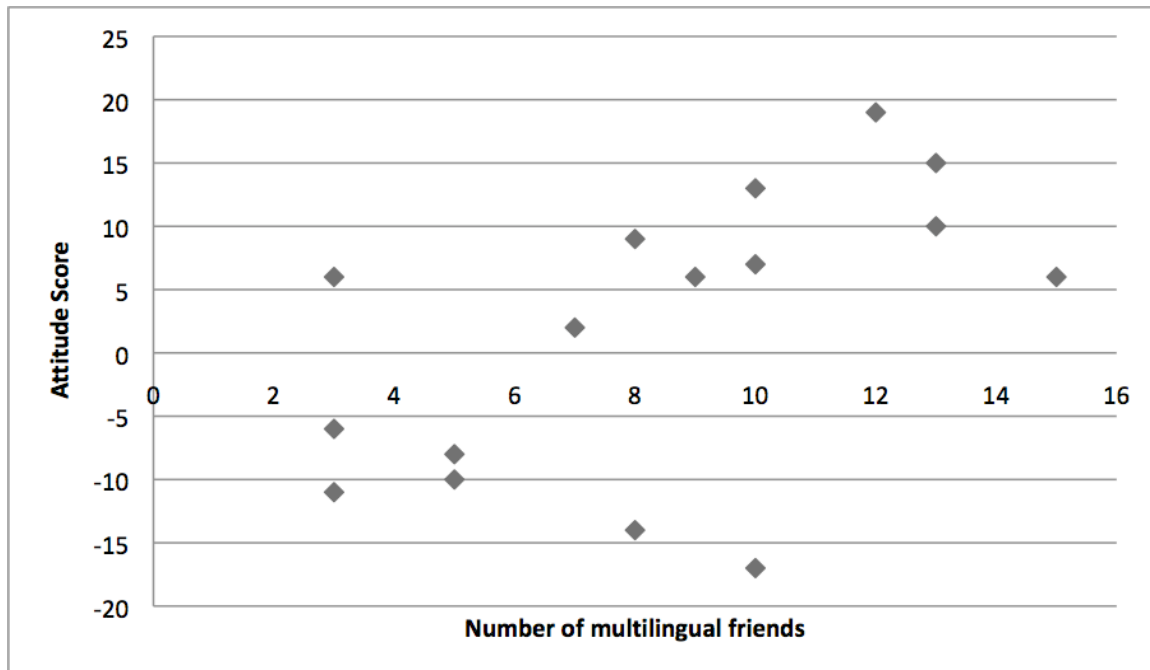
In order to answer our research question and test the hypothesis, we needed to compare three variables of our study, namely number of Urdu-speaking friends, number of multilingual friends and the number of English-monolingual friends with the AS calculated for each questionnaire. As explained early, the AS for each of our 16 informants was calculated. Figure 1 shows these scores along with the number Urdu-speaking friends for each individual.



**Figure 1: Attitude score of participants in relation with the number of their Urdu-speaking friends**

Although the pattern is not without exceptions, Figure 1 shows that generally, individuals with more Urdu-speaking friends scored higher in the attitude test. No one with more than 6 Urdu-speaking friends had a negative attitude towards Urdu while no one with less than 3 Urdu-speaking friends had any positive attitude towards the language. These results confirm the weak version of the hypothesis that individuals with more Urdu-speaking ties have more positive attitudes toward the language.

Figure 2 shows attitude scores along with the number of multilingual friends for each person:

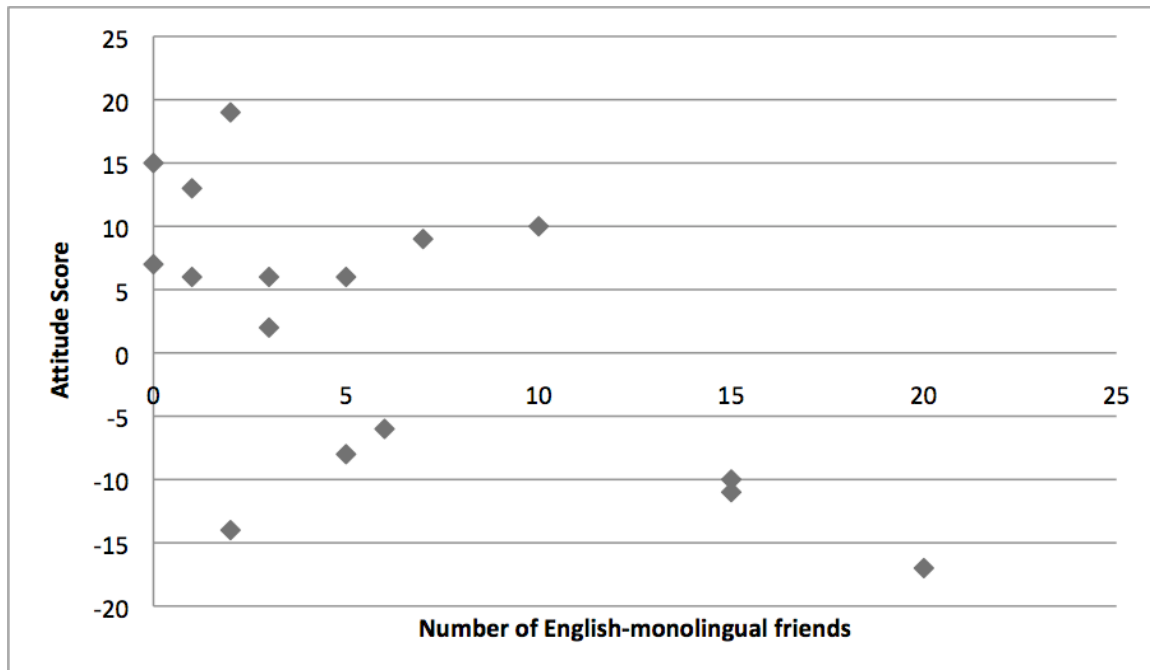


**Figure 2: Attitude score in relation with number of multilingual friends of the participant**

Here the pattern is not generally clear and the results seem more random. While there appears to be no negative attitudes among individuals with more than 12 multilingual friends, the attitudes seem randomly stratified among the individuals with 2 to 10 multilingual ties. More samples or a clearer definition of multilingual friends may be required to be able to arrive at a conclusion for the multilingual variable analysis. Therefore the results reject the strong version of the hypothesis that individuals with more multilingual ties have more positive attitudes towards the target language i.e. Urdu.

Figure 3 shows attitude scores along with the number of monolingual-English friends for each person:





**Figure 3: Attitude in relation with the number of English-monolingual speakers**

Although this figure shows some exceptions as well, there seem to be a general pattern that individuals with less English-monolingual friends have a more positive attitude towards Urdu. These results are not as clear-cut as results of figure 1 but seem more systematic than the numbers in Figure 2.

#### **4.2 Issue/Question Analysis**

Our analysis of our results suggests that of our findings remain inconclusive in some areas of our research of the Urdu language, while insightful in others. Some of our results proved conclusive and useful in determining a general attitude towards Urdu, but others seemed arbitrary and rather difficult to draw proper conclusions. For example, in Part II of our questionnaire, our informants were given the opportunity to provide their preferences towards statements about Urdu. These sentences were designed to help us to indirectly determine attitudes towards the language.

When informants were asked to determine whether they agreed Urdu was a beautiful language, they showed a wide variety of responses. In fact we received every response possible given in the question, with the exception of response 1. Finding the mean response of all the provided response from our informants to be 4.25 (with 4 to indicate ambivalence towards any given statement) perhaps these specific findings suggest that our informants generally maintain a positive attitude with regards to Urdu. However when informants were prompted to respond to whether they felt that all British residents needed to know English fluently, they also provided a generally positive response, with a number of our informants

giving 7 as their responses. In fact, only a handful (6 of 16) gave responses below 5. As a result, the mean produced a higher decimal deviation from 4 with 4.875 as our finding.

The differences may be small, but perhaps their comparisons suggest that while some harbour a positive attitude towards the aesthetics and sounds of Urdu, they also maintain their belief that British residents need to know English fluently. This may also be in part due to the high value in utility and practicality English is often known to have. Therefore, while a positive attitude may surround Urdu, English is still regarded as a language of higher practicality in society. For the most part, we generally produced means for the majority of our questions that were only a small deviation from 4, with 0.875 as the largest deviation. As further corroboration that Urdu is viewed as carrying less practicality, our findings for one of our questions (that prompted informants to provide their preferences towards whether they believed road-side adverts should have translations in Urdu) remained within the range of 5 and below, which despite showing some agreement that adverts should be Urdu, still shows fewer higher rated responses compared to some of the other questions. There were a number of 5s, which were accompanied by a handful of 2s and 3s, ultimately lowering the mean to 3.0625. Given the mean for those particular findings to value less than 4, perhaps our results suggest that a more negative attitude is present towards Urdu developing a greater prominence in the community of Longsight.

Residents may feel positively towards Urdu as a general language, but less so when considering Urdu's potentially growing role in the community. The most insightful aspect of our research was the findings we reported when informants were asked to respond to the statement of whether people who spoke English were prejudiced towards those who were incapable of using English as their first language. We fully recognize that this statement in particular was more pointed than the other ones we used in our questionnaire, but we feel that it yielded worthwhile results that contribute to our research. In fact our findings for these proved to yield only responses of 5s, 6s and 7s and no others, suggesting that many, if not all, of our informants strongly agreed with the statement. Furthermore, our mean value for those findings proved to be 6.0625, the highest mean of all our results.

That said, our findings suggest that our informants demonstrate a wide range of attitudes towards the language of Urdu, but often remain generally ambivalent towards extreme statements regarding the language, hence our mean values coming within range of 4, with the exception of 3 and 6. However given that our mean values of any variation of 4 were between 4.25 and 4.875, we believe that our research suggests that the upward deviations from 4 suggest a more positive leaning towards the language of Urdu. Perhaps future research can focus specifically on the community's attitude towards one particular aspect of

Urdu as a language. For example, additional research could potentially focus on the community's attitude towards Urdu's expansion in certain aspects of society, such as education or general infrastructure.

## **5. Qualitative Analysis**

Part III prompted the participants to give a brief opinion of the Urdu language. A number of responses proved to be very insightful and helped us achieve a qualitative analysis of participant's attitudes as well. The opinions do not merge together to form one particular attitude instead we see a different number of responses.

One attitude we found to be particularly predominant was that a few of our informants found it unsettling when Urdu speakers communicated with other Urdu speaker whilst in presence of a non-Urdu speaker. Participants described themselves as being "uncomfortable" in such situations and the issue of "rudeness" was linked to this scenario. A shared attitude amongst them was that they felt "extremely judged" when they spoke their language to other Urdu speakers and they felt that they had to "hide their identity". The majority of Urdu speakers only used Urdu with their close friends and family in their homes, which may be due to the aforementioned fact.

The English language proved to be the language most used by our participants for both positive and negative reasons. One speaker mentioned they "loved" the English language, sound and culture and for that reason considered English to be their "favourite language to communicate with." However another information mentioned that English was their main language due to pressure from other English speakers around them and that because they were in England they felt they "had" to use English for means of communication. Issues regarding terrorism were linked directly to Urdu and one participant stated, "This is the reason why people hate Urdu: Terrorism." This reason was given by a considerable number of the participants as possible reasons for Urdu's "very negative status in England".

We found that Urdu speakers had an urgency to try and reduce these negative attitudes and so responded positively to the suggestion of the Government provide free night classes (Question 9). However others responded negatively because they believed such classes would cause major conflicts and protests, creating even more negative attitudes towards Urdu.

Most of our participants strongly agreed Question 10 ("English speaking people are prejudiced towards people who do not speak English as their first language") and even went as far to state, "English people are too lazy to learn our language and they should know that

it is very difficult and it takes a lot of time to learn another language. They should be positive towards the language of Urdu as we Urdu speakers have dedicated our time to learn their language so why can't they do the same?" Thus, negative attitudes towards Urdu can definitely be detected from our findings, but we did also come across several positive responses with such responses as "I think it's a very elegant language and very easy to pick up and learn. Go for it" and "It is a language that I am extremely proud of and it lets me communicate to my friends which is the best thing". Unfortunately it seems that negative attitudes will most likely persist into the future. One speaker stated, "There are bad boundaries between non English Urdu speakers and English speakers and this barrier needs to be broken. Only then Urdu will be seen as beautiful."

## **6. Conclusion**

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire confirms the weak version of the hypothesis that individuals with more ties in their social network structures to speakers of the target language have a more positive attitude towards the target language. On the other hand there seems to be no evidence to support the strong version of the hypothesis. However, it is plausible to claim that another factor that clearly influences people's language attitudes is in fact their social network structures. Further research with more samples on this topic can provide further insight into the effect of social networks on language attitudes.

## 7. Appendix

### Participant Consent Form

#### Applying social networks to attitude studies: The case of Urdu in Longsight

The aim of this study is to determine the general attitudes towards Urdu in Longsight. You will be asked some simple questions about your attitude and how you feel about Urdu. If you need any further explanation, please contact:  
longsight.study@gmail.com

- I realise that I may withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.
- I understand that my contribution will remain anonymous within all aspects of the study.
- I agree to participate in this research study.
- This agreement is of my own free will.
- I have had the opportunity to ask any questions about the study.

Signed: ..... Date: .....

*(by participant)*

Print name: .....

*Signed on behalf of researchers*

Signed: ..... Date: .....

Print Name: .....

Research Title: Applying social networks to attitude studies: The case of Urdu in  
Longsight

Questionnaire:

Part I:

Age:

Gender:

Nationality:

How many of your friends speak Urdu?

How many of your friends speak two or more languages?

How many of your friends only speak English?

Part II:

To what extent do you agree with the following?

(1 = strongly disagree, 4 = no preference, 7 = strongly agree):

1. Urdu is a beautiful language

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

2. All British residents must be able to speak English fluently

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

3. In most schools, French, German and Spanish are offered as options for the compulsory language requirement. Urdu should also be introduced as an option.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

4. Road side advertisements should have Urdu translation

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

5. There should be an option of Urdu subtitles on TV programmes

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

6. I like the sounds of the Urdu language

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

7. The council should make all leaflets in Urdu as well as English

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8. The government spends too much money on translating information into other languages

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

9. Government should fund free night classes offered to those who want to learn Urdu

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

10. English speaking people are prejudiced towards people who do not speak English as their first language

Part III:

Could you please describe your opinion of Urdu in a few sentences?

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